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A MODEL FOR WINNING - AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE FOR APPLYING OPERATIONAL ART TO THE WAR ON DRUGS

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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15. Abstract: AFTER BRIEFLY PROFILING THE STATUS OF DRUG ABUSE IN AMERICA ON THE EVE OF THE TEN YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POICY AND THE ADVENT OF THE SO-CALLED WAR ON DRUGS, THE AUTHOR PROPOSES A THESIS TO EXPLAIN WHY OPERATIONAL SUCCESS IN FIGHTING THE DRUG WAR HAS NOT TRANSLATED IN A STRAIGHT-FORWARD WAY INTO ATTAINMENT OF NATIONAL STRATEGIC GOALS AS SET FORTH IN THE NATIONAL COUNTER DRUG STRATEGY (NDCS). THE THESIS IS THAT SUBTLE BUT SIGNIFICANT INCONSISTANCIES IN THE NDCS COUPLED WITH UNRECOGNIZED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE ECONOMIC CYCLE THAT GOVERNS DRUG CARTEL OPERATIONS HAVE LED TO AN INABILITY BY OPERATIONAL COMMANDERS TO ACCURATELY DISCERN STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL CENTERS OF GRAVITY. THIS, IN TURN, HAS IMPACTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF APPROPRIATE THEATER-STRATEGIC GOALS AS WELL AS APPROPRIATE OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF ACTION IN MOOTW. THE AUTHOR THEN EXAMINES THE GOALS OF NDCS IN DETAIL AND PROPOSES A MODEL FOR THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS GOVERNING DRUG CARTEL ECONOMICS. HE THEN PROPOSES AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL, WHICH IS THEN CONTRASTED WITH THE FIRST. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS OF THE ALTERNATIVE MODEL ARE DEVELOPED AND A VARIETY OF RECOMMENDATIONS ARE OFFERED FOR STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL PLANNERS.

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Introduction

This fall, two ten-year anniversaries might be celebrated in Washington, DC, although both will probably pass with little fanfare. October 1st will mark the 10th anniversary of the implementation of the Fiscal Year 1989 Defense Authorization Act, which first assigned DoD as lead agency for detection and monitoring (D&M) of Air and Maritime Transit of illegal drugs into the United States.[1] And, in November, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, born of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, will record its institutional 10th birthday.[2] These milestones signal the close of the first decade of the so-called *War on Drugs* and provide an opportunity to critically evaluate our progress in attaining the national strategic aim of reducing illegal drug abuse and ameliorating its impact on our society.

Profile of Drug Abuse in America

During the past decade there has been great progress. Former-First Lady Nancy Reagan's *Just Say No* campaign significantly increased public awareness and concern for the scope and depth of the damage to society from widespread illegal drug abuse.[3] Sustained bipartisan Congressional support for counter-drug programs has resulted in steady growth in the National Drug Control Budget, which has increased from $4.7 to $15.1 billion.[4] Tremendous adaptation and the evolution and implementation of a taskforce approach have led to an effective blending of strengths and common focus at strategic, operational and tactical levels within and among myriad federal, state and local agencies.[5] The employment of military forces, particularly in the domestic arena, has been carefully orchestrated to fully conform to Title 10 and Posse Comitatus law limitations. National Guard units most frequently function under State Authority, per the less restrictive tenants of Title 32,[6] while Coast Guard law enforcement detachments (LEDETs) embarked in U.S. Navy warships take control when performing law enforcement functions.

Often relying on critical military support, drug law enforcement agencies (DLEAs) have been increasingly successful in interdicting illicit drugs both domestically and internationally. In the case of cocaine, for example, it is estimated that as much as 30 percent of the world's 800 metric ton annual production is now being seized or disrupted.[7] Finally, 1995 estimates place the number of regular abusers of illicit drugs at 12.8 million Americans--nearly a 50 percent reduction from the 1979 high of 25 million.[8]

Yet, during the decade there have been failures and setbacks. Over 200,000 Americans have died from the effects of drug abuse[9] and the annual death toll, which climbed 47 percent between 1990 and 1994,[10] now stands at 25,000.[11] Already, the number of American *Drug War* dead is twice that of the Vietnam and Korean Wars combined and, at current rates, will exceed the total for Vietnam, Korea *and* all theaters of World War II by the year 2004.[12] Each year, between 100,000 and 300,000 babies are exposed to illegal drugs in utero and thousands of these are born with birth defects or drug addictions themselves. The nearly 20 million Americans who used illegal drugs during 1995 poured some $49 billion into the underground drug economy. The social costs of drug-related crime (private property damage, increased demand on social services and the criminal justice system, as well as increased health care costs) is an incredible $67 billion. Federal, state and local governments spend an additional $30 billion on demand and supply reduction efforts and in dealing with related problems. The total annual economic impact of illegal drug use on American society: $150 billion.[13]

Most disturbing, perhaps, are the statistics which indicate that during the past two to three years the declining trend in drug abuse among America's youth has reversed.[14] One in three high school seniors has tried marijuana, one in five has used it within the last month. The age range in which adolescents first experiment with drugs has dropped from 14-17 to 13-15, resulting in a

spike of emergency room treatments for drug overdose in young children.[15] Increased purity and potency in many drugs have contributed to the increase in drug-related deaths and emergency room episodes. A resurgence in the use of heroin as a cheap alternative to cocaine and the increased popularity of methamphetamine present significant problems.[16]

On balance, our performance in the drug war has been mixed. Steadily growing and occasionally spectacular operational successes have produced ephemeral results. Pressure against the drug cartels on a number of fronts--supply reduction, source zone and transit zone interdiction, demand reduction, arrests of cartel leadership, and financial regulation and enforcement targeting money laundering activities--have forced the cartels to shift operational patterns and tactics, but in the end there remains a virtually unlimited supply of illegal drugs on the streets of America for sale at relatively stable prices to satisfy a persistent and insatiable appetite. Why is this so?

Thesis

I assert that subtle but significant inconsistencies in the National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) coupled with an unrecognized underlying assumption about the nature of the drug cartels' economic cycle have led to an inability to correctly identify and understand the enemy's center of gravity (COG). This, in turn, has impacted the development of theater-strategic goals and obscured the identification of appropriate operational objectives in accordance with the principles of action for conducting Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). In the following pages, I will examine the goals of the NDCS, describe the assumed economic model that I believe underlies the national-level strategic guidance for counter-drug operations, and propose a new model for drug cartel activity which may explain why we, like Tantalus, see the fruits of victory repeatedly draw back out of reach, despite our most determined efforts.

Winnable War or Enduring Challenge?

The current NDCS characterizes drug abuse in America as an enduring challenge. The phrase *War on Drugs* it says is misleading in that wars are expected to end. Combating drug abuse is likened to fighting cancer:

> [i]t requires the mobilization of support mechanisms...to check its spread, deal with its consequences, and improve the prognosis. Resistance...is necessary, but so is patience, compassion, and the will to carry on...[p]ain must be managed...[t]he road to recovery is long and complex.[17]

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, the sobering statistics cited in the Profile of Drug Abuse in America above, many Americans might well expect that the National Drug Control Strategy's aim of *reducing* drug abuse would be carried to the extreme of *eliminating* of drug abuse. In the terms of the NDCS's disease analogy, cancer research efforts are clearly not restricted in scope to merely palliative or preventative measures, but are focused to a large degree on finding a cure--putting an end to the battle, not only for individual patients, but finally, once-and-for-all, for mankind as a whole. Exactly how far illegal drug abuse needs to be reduced before it no longer poses a threat to national security is a question left open by the NDCS. Colonels Mendel and Munger, in their study Strategic Planning and the Drug Threat, define winning the *Drug War* as "reducing the amount of drug abuse and drug traffic to a level which is acceptable to U.S. society and which does not seriously degrade our national security, our economic well-being, and our social order."[18] Stopping short of total elimination, these criteria are certainly less vague, and seem a practical description of the minimum conditions necessary for a President to declare the *Drug War* won.

Chapter III of the NDCS (Strategic Goals and Objectives) opens by stating that "[t]he adverse consequences of drug use can be reduced by lessening the demand for illegal drugs or their availability. Neither approach, however, is sufficient by itself."[19] Thus the national

strategy for combating drug abuse is cast in the terms classical supply and demand economics, though subsequent discussions further qualify this first, basic tenet. These discussions can be summarized as follows: in a perfect world demand reduction would be sufficient, but, to the extent that human beings are flawed individuals, they will always present a certain amount of demand. Therefore we must focus on the demand side (particularly through education and treatment efforts to ameliorate human weakness and susceptibility) while not forgetting the supply side since we know demand will never go to zero.[20] The supply side is a "chain from cultivation to production and trafficking" and we must operate "against every link."[21]

The NDCS then lays out five strategic goals with supporting objectives and attendant rationale. The five goals are:

- **Goal 1: Educate and Enable America's Youth to Reject Illegal Drugs as well as Alcohol and Tobacco.**
- **Goal 2: Increase the Safety of America's Citizens by Substantially Reducing Drug-Related Crime and Violence.**
- **Goal 3: Reduce Health and Social Costs to the Public of Illegal Drug Use.**
- **Goal 4: Shield America's Air, Land, and Sea Frontiers for the Drug Threat.**
- **Goal 5: Break Foreign and Domestic Sources of Supply.**[22]

Objective 5 under Goal 5 is to "[p]romote international policies and laws that deter money laundering and facilitate anti-money laundering investigations as well as seizure of associated assets." The rationale states that drug cartels seek to create "profits for the ultimate purpose of investing in legal enterprises."[23] The supply side "chain" has now become a loop. Clearly substantial profits may be siphoned off to be 'invested' in legitimate business, but before this can happen operating expenses must be covered, otherwise it's a one way, one time trip and not self-sustaining. This is why an objective of attacking the money flowing from the consumers back to

the cartels comes under the goal of breaking sources of supply. So far it can be concluded from the NDCS that the essence of drug cartel activity is almost purely economic in character. In a perfect world, the demand for illicit drugs might be considered the drug cartels' strategic COG (though not explicitly defined as such). But, since the COG consists of American citizens, we are limited as to the ways and means of our attack and are forced to be more circumspect. The approach prescribed is to attack the COG through largely non-lethal and remedial means while putting pressure roughly equally on every other "link."

One last point needs to be made before leaving the NDCS. Although it is asserted and generally assumed that Goals 1, 2 and 3 target demand and Goals 4 and 5 target supply, I disagree. Goal 1 is clearly a demand side goal just as Goal 5 is clearly supply related. Goals 2 and 3, which respectively emphasize increasing safety by reducing drug-related crime and reducing health and social costs, really only attack the symptoms of drug demand and not the demand itself. Obviously, drug-related crime does not create a demand, nor do increased health care costs induce people to turn to illegal drugs. You could eliminate most drug-related crime by simply decriminalizing drug use, but it would do very little for demand itself--it might even increase.

Goal 4, to shield America's frontiers from the drug threat, affects supply only to the extent that you define supply not as what actually exists, but rather what you have access to. This may seem like splitting hairs until the drug problem is considered in a global context. Throwing a blockade around our own nation will reduce the flow of drugs into the country for as long as the blockade is in place, yet it is little more than a temporary inconvenience to the drug cartels that take the long view. They can simply reduce production or move aggressively to expand into other markets, say in Europe or China, to maintain their bottom line profitability.

Restricting supply without reducing demand will drive up prices for what drugs do get through, possibly increasing the potential for even higher levels of drug-related crime and violence. In the meanwhile, we squander our treasure on maintaining the blockade and 10, 20 or 30 years from now when economic conditions force a cutback--there sit the cartels waiting patiently to move back into the market.

The foregoing discussion leads to two critical conclusions. First, although the NDCS's goals may not be mutually exclusive, they aren't necessarily mutually supportive either. Therefore, simultaneous efforts in all areas, no matter how well coordinated or intentioned, will work to a certain degree to cross-purposes. Secondly, this may be an intentional and necessary strategic design flaw. Active pursuit of Goals 2, 3 and 4 is likely to produce the most visible results in the shortest period of time, although attaining these goals, measured by the NDCS's own definitions, either singly or together cannot achieve the strategic aim in the long run. The incremental dividends achieved through the pursuit of these goals may be considered necessary, however, to sustain public will and Congressional support. CNN video of Coast Guard sailors destroying bricks of cocaine at sea, dramatic improvement in certain crime statistics or measurable success in reducing drug-related demands on the health care system may be what is needed to keep us in the fight, even if these can't ultimately solve the problem.

This analysis begs the questions: do we truly understand the dynamics of cartel economics? If we do, and this is as good as our understanding gets, then we may never win. If not, then is there another approach, a different perspective?

The 2-D Perception of the Drug Cartels' Economic Cycle

Archimedes is often misquoted as having said, 'give me the right lever and I will move the earth.' The exact translation is closer to 'give me the proper fulcrum and I will move the

earth.' I believe it is clear from the NDCS that economic considerations propel cartel operations and that the lever of U.S. national power forged from economic, diplomatic, military, informational and technological strengths must ultimately work against the economics behind drug cartel operations if we are to be successful. I propose to take a holistic approach by defining the drug cartels' strategic COG as the economic viability of the whole system. The following paragraphs attempt to model the cartels' economic cycle to identify the proper fulcrum--in other words, to find the correct critical vulnerability through which we can attack the COG.

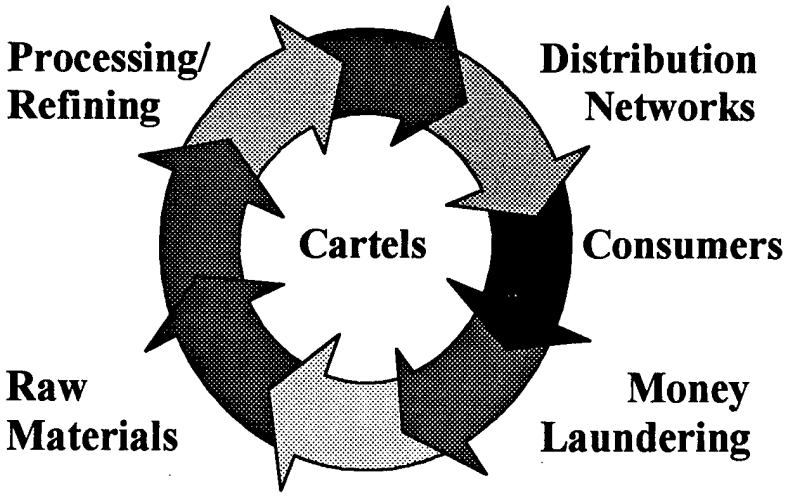

Figure 1
Conventional Perception of Drug Cartel Economic Cycle

Figure 1 depicts what I call the conventional perception or two-dimensional model of drug cartel economic activity. The model is simple and derives from the supply "chain" discussed in the NDCS; however, it is not explicit in the NDCS, nor is it doctrine. The model shows the cartels at the center, a generic representation of cartel leadership, strategic vision or

central guidance. The circle of arrows depicts the economic cycle: raw materials are cultivated or purchased, they are shipped to a drug lab to be processed, the refined product is then moved through a distribution network to the point of sale where the consumer translates the product to cash. They cash flows through a money-laundering network where it eventually is used to begin the cycle again. As can be seen from the examination of the NDCS's goals, this simple and reasonable model actually describes the common understanding of how the cartels work. It would appear from this model that the cycle can be broken at any point and the symmetry of the circle doesn't favor any particular point over another. In theory, therefore, any single objective or combination may be selected with consideration for the other principles of action--legitimacy, restraint, security, unity of effort, persistence--which will then drive the problem. For example, if you believe you need to generate incremental dividends to sustain public support and therefore maintain the legitimacy of your operations, all other factors being equal, you might choose to interdict the distribution system is such a way as to readily provide those dividends.

The difficulty is that although this model appears to be the mold from which the NDCS was cast and while it appeals to common sense, it doesn't help to explain why during the past decade we haven't been able to readily translate operational success in a straight-forward manner into attainment of the strategic goals. The operator's experience in the *Drug War* might be likened to the experience of boxing the Pillsbury Doughboy: you can hit him hard, fast and with power just about anywhere and have every appearance of having an impact; but, he never topples and as soon as you let up, he swells back to pretty much his original shape and size, none the worse for wear. This model doesn't precisely jibe, therefore, with experience at the operational or the tactical level of the *Drug War*.

The 3-D Model - A New Perspective

Figure 2 presents my proposed alternative to the two-dimensional model. Here, drug cartel operations are envisioned in terms of concentric functional spheres. The cartels' leadership is depicted at the core. Travelling outward, the first sphere represents the function of obtaining or cultivating the necessary raw materials. The second is the processing/refining sphere and the third layer is the consumer sphere. Although unlabeled, when travelling inward the spheres represent different functions within the money laundering process. The first sphere might be an offshore bank in the Caymans, the second a Swiss bank account containing funds for a 'legitimate' European or Japanese company, and the third step might be a bank in Colombia.[24]

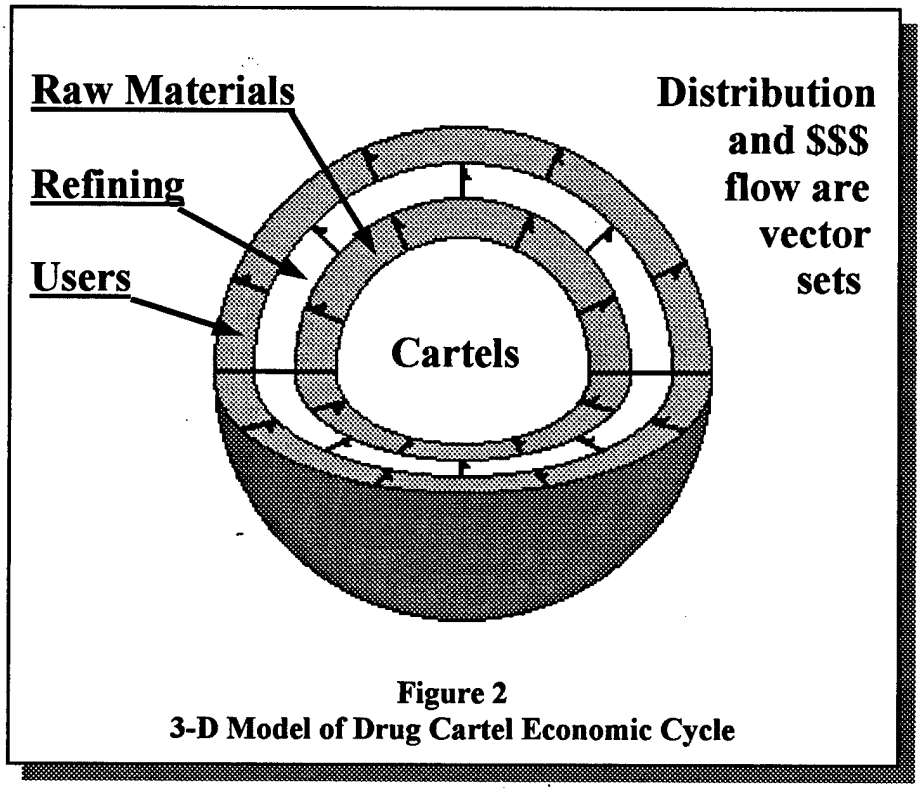

Figure 2
3-D Model of Drug Cartel Economic Cycle

The flow or distribution of product on the way out (or of money--electronic or cash--on the way in) is represented by vector sets, which contain the infinite number of paths connecting each point on the outer surface of a smaller sphere with each point on the inner surface of the next larger sphere.

The important distinctions between the models are these: 1) although distribution vectors are easily identified and attacked in both models, the 3-D model shows an order of magnitude increase in the complexity of the distribution paths even with the innermost sphere; 2) because the 3-D model has depth, breaking the economic cycle isn't as simple as it was for Alexander the Great to cut the Gordian knot with a single stroke of his sword, attacking one of the inner spheres is rather like trying to core an apple without breaking the skin.; and 3) the geometric dimensions of the model more closely mirrors the physical dimensions (factor space) of the real-world drug problem. What I mean by this is that looking at the drug problem from a global point of view, the spatial boundary of the consumer sphere is not the United States alone, but is, in fact, the globe--or at least those portions of the globe containing potential consumers. The raw materials sphere, while still large, is clearly the smallest. In other words, consumers are everywhere, drug labs can potentially be located in numerous places, and the regions suitable for the production of the raw materials--the poppy and the coca plant--are relatively small by comparison.

Planning Implications of the Alternative Model

What conclusions can the operational planner draw from the Alternative Model? At first blush, one might conclude that the added level of complexity makes a nearly impossible task completely impossible. If the forces available can't fully tackle transit zone interdiction in two dimensions, for example, how can they do it in three? And, since the notion of different dimensions in the models is only partially analogous to the length, width and height of terrain in

the real world, how can we meaningfully interpret them anyway? To these potentially valid criticisms I offer my own conclusions. As for the simplest prerequisite, that of merely describing the functional nodes of the drug cartels' activities and their interrelationships, both models appear to satisfy this requirement at least as far as is demanded by the understanding of how cartel economics work as implied in the NDCS. In addition, I believe that the Alternative Model is superior in reflecting drug cartel economics on a global scale. The conventional 2-D model for U.S.-only consumption is embedded in the 3-D model, but so are the 2-D models for Europe, for Africa, for China, etc. In this sense, the model is more in consonance with the National Security Strategy's preference for adopting a coalition/allied vision rather than a unilateral one.[25] Also it makes the subtle contradictions buried in the NDCS as discussed in relation to Goals 2, 3, and especially 4, stand out starkly. Best of all, the Alternative Model confers relative advantages and disadvantages to the various elements of the economic cycle so that they can perhaps be better evaluated as critical vulnerabilities through which operations can strike at the economic vitality of the illicit drug business.

If the 3-D model is valid, it seems clear that developing operations, which attack the source sphere of raw materials, have the best chance of destroying the strategic COG. The drug cartels' dependence on plant species that can be successfully commercially cultivated in certain, limited areas of the world emerges as the operational COG; while any number of possible critical vulnerabilities can be identified, including willingness of native farmers to give preference to coca or poppy over plants not useful to the cartels, or perhaps the relative susceptibility and sensitivity of the coca and poppy to herbicides or biological agents. The demand side of the supply and demand equation, then, becomes relatively unbounded and nearly unassailable. Interdiction efforts against distribution and cash flow vector sets appear less useful than in the

2-D model, except that if you do conduct interdiction, say as an operational fire, then those interdiction efforts directed against the vector sets connecting the inner-most spheres will have a proportionally greater effect than those directed against vector sets for an outer sphere. Moreover, working the inner spheres might well prove advantageous in achieving things like concentration, mass or maneuver.

Recommendations

Based on the Profile of Drug Abuse in America on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the *War on Drugs* the best I can foresee is a long uphill battle, during which success and setback are cyclic. Barring the unforeseen capitulation of the drug lords, the development of a vaccine for cocaine addiction, or a major meteor strike in the Andean Ridge, the cancer metaphor is likely most appropriate, particularly if we follow the prescribed protocol of emphasizing domestic demand and secondary goals that actually target symptoms, not root causes.

Though this vision of the future isn't particularly rosy, especially as the *Drug War* death toll rises and America's social fabric and support systems stretch and sag under an increasing weight, I don't believe a radical departure from current strategic guidance is warranted. I do recommend that the underlying economic structures, mechanisms and relationships that govern drug cartel operations be examined more rigorously and treated more explicitly in national strategic guidance. At the operational level, I recommend that if and when better cartel models are developed that they be tested empirically and circumstantially against past and current operational success. Based on my analysis, I recommend increased focus in the Andean Ridge against the sources of raw materials. Operations such a LASER STRIKE might be expanded and given higher priority for limited resources vis-a-vis transit zone interdiction operations. The implications of the Alternative Model are such that no matter where or how effort is applied, the

problem of predicting results and attaining the desired end state may be much more complex than we have imagined. This means that despite the tremendous progress we have made in understanding and achieving unity of effort in the *Drug War* we must redouble our exertion in this regard. Finally, I recommend that winning always be our ultimate goal, however we choose to define it, in MOOTW as well as in war. If we adopt an air of resignation, engaging in "enduring challenges" because they, unlike war, aren't expected to end, then we've lost whatever chance there may have been for victory, because first we lost our hope.

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